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BIBLE INTERPRETATION; HOW AND HOW NOT.*

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That a Jew is now permitted, and indeed invited to speak before Christian ministers of the Gospel, is a hopeful sign that we are approaching the time in which seekers of truth of the various denominations, can work together, harmoniously and peacefully, like true brethren. All study and investigation must have but one and the same object in view, namely, to overthrow ignorance, to emancipate the mind from preconceived, but unfounded notions, and to arrive at the truth. And why should Christians and Jews, Trinitarians and Unitarians not work thus together? There is no Jewish Hebrew grammar, no Christian Hebrew grammar; no Presbyterian Greek language and no Episcopalian Greek language,—there is but one and the same Hebrew and one and the same Greek for all. I would even go farther. I would say that there is no denominational Ecclesiastical history and no sectarian Bible exegesis. In these fields, likewise, the truth is but one. In Church history, it is of course natural that a Jew should be more interested in the Rabbinical literature of the Middle Ages and the later development of the Jewish Church, than a Christian, in most cases, would be. On the other hand, it is also to be expected that a Christian student will take a deeper interest than a Jew, in the study of the history of specific Christian doctrines and institutions. A Baptist will naturally be more attracted by the study of the question of baptism than a Unitarian. But the absolute truth, I repeat, is but one. And so I foresee the time when, instead of four or five theological seminaries in Chicago and its suburbs, there will be but one excellently equipped and excellently endowed institution, with a large number of teachers for the various branches, with libraries and other advantages which may well be compared with those in Oxford and Cambridge, in Berlin and Leipzig. This institution for “theological” learning will, as I foresee it, be connected with a grand coming University, and will form an integral part of it. And in this University of the future, by the side of professorial chairs for all other possible departments of knowledge, and under the silent, yet powerful influence of the other branches of learning, the “theological” studies, will be secured against the creeping in of a spirit of mental narrowness on the one hand, and a spirit of undue haughtiness on the other.

But what have I to say concerning the exegesis of the Scriptures? Is this not to be taught differently in separate denominational seminaries? I answer, without hesitation, *no*. From the professor’s chair, the Bible must be explained and studied without any preconceived doctrinal or sectarian bias. History, archæology, philology, must be the handmaids of Biblical science, and not denominational considerations. Whether in our days a man may marry his deceased wife’s sister, or not, is, as a practical question, to be settled by the legislative authorities of the Episcopalian Church, in England by the English Parliament. But whether such marriages were allowed, or prohibited, by the Bible, is for the unbiased Old Testament student to say. When and in what manner the rite of baptism should be performed, is to be decided by the Councils and other competent authorities of the various Christian sects. But whether the Hebrew verb *ṭābhāl* means

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to immerse, or to sprinkle, and whether immersion or sprinkling was the practice among the Jews 1800 years ago, are questions for the Hebrew philologist and Bible commentator, for the historian of Judaism and Christianity, and not for the elders of churches and for delegates to church conventions to determine. These questions *must* be answered and *can* be answered fully, independently of denominational disputes and rituals. And such is even the case in still more important questions of dogma and practice. Professors and learners in the field of Bible science must rise above all denominational bias. A biased teacher will too easily and too frequently darken where he should enlighten, and convey errors where he should give nothing but the absolute truth. Such biased teachers we find among the Jews as well as among the Christians, among the Protestants as well as among the Catholics, among the Muhammedans as well as among the teachers of the two older religions of Semitic origin.

Let me give here a few instances of such expositions of the Bible, tinctured by religious prejudices. Muhammedan theologians find in the Old Testament quite a number of predictions of, and typical allusions to, the prophet of Mecca, where an unprejudiced Jewish or Christian Bible reader would not dream of detecting a trace of such an allusion. They see, e. g., Muhammed alluded to in Haggai II., 7, in these words: "*The desire of all the nations shall come.*" *The desire* (Hemdah) *of all the nations*, is Muhammed—so the theologians of the Islam say—and this is sufficiently demonstrated by the fact that the words Hemdah and Muhammed are derived from the same root, from the verb *hāmādh*. Is it necessary for us, who do not live under the shadow of the Mosque, and into whom Muhammedan teachings have not been engrafted, to show the total fallacy of this interpretation? *First*, the word *hēmḏāh*, in this passage, cannot mean "the desired one;" its meaning is rather "the desirable objects," "the precious things," (plural), as the verb (*ubhā'û*) stands in the plural ("they shall come," not "*he* shall come"). *Secondly*, the whole contextual structure shows that the prophet speaks of the coming glory and grandeur of the new temple, whose erection had just begun in his days; and, referring to the bright future of the rising sanctuary, the inspired prophet says: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, In a little while I will shake the heavens and the earth and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, and the precious things of all nations, they shall come (*i. e.*, into this house), and I will fill this house with glory," etc.

To another instance of Muhammedan Bible-exposition I call your attention. You know that Muhammedan theology admits the divine origin of Judaism and of Christianity; but, at the same time, it claims that the Islam is also divinely revealed, and that, moreover, it occupies a higher grade of religion than do its two older sisters. In support of this doctrine, Moses is brought forward and made to bear testimony! Of the words with which his parting blessing (Deut. xxxiii., 2) commences, Muhammedan theologians give the following explanation, "*The Lord came from Sinai*;" that means, the Lord revealed himself to Israel; for "*Sināy*" signifies the Hebrew people; "*and he rose in light from Seir to them*;" that means, to Christendom also God revealed himself; for "*Sē'ir*," the country in which Edom dwelt (see Gen. xxxvi., 8, and other places) stands for Edom, and "*Edom*" came, in the course of time, to be regarded as a symbolical name for Rome, for the Roman empire, and afterwards for the Christian world, whose spiritual center was in the city of Rome; "*he shone forth from Mount Paran*;" that means, God revealed himself also to the Arabian prophet, to Muhammed;

for "Pârân," where Ishmael, the patriarch of the Arabians, was living (Gen. xxi., 21), is used here to designate the Ishmaelite Muhammed. Furthermore, it deserves mention that Muhammed himself appealed to the Hebrew Scriptures, which, he said, he did not come to destroy, but to fulfil, and which, as he argued, for those who had eyes to see, pointed to him. "*A prophet from the midst of you, from your brethren, like unto me, will the Lord your God raise up unto you; to him you shall hearken.*" Thus we read in Deut. xviii., 15; and, in reference to such and similar passages, the doctors of the Koran ask: Was Muhammed not like unto Moses? Did he not come from Israel's brethren, from the children of Ishmael? Is there not, in the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophecy, and here, in the rise of Muhammed, the fulfilment? Are there not, in the Old Bible, the types, and here, in the new Koran, the antitypes? Did not the inspired men of Israel foresee the coming prophet of Arabia?

These peculiar methods of interpreting the Bible remind us of the methods, which Persian believers in the Koran employ in the interpretation of the odes of their great national poet Hafiz. Muhammed Shemseddin Hafiz, as is well known, sang of wine, and of love, and of nightingales, and of roses—in fact, of beauty in every form. Can such poetry be accepted by the ecclesiastical authorities in Persia, and by the pious ministers of the Muhammedan religion in that country? Yes, the odes of Hafiz, so they say, must only be understood rightly; it must be believed that they are intended as an allegorical and mystical revelation of things divine. And so their commentators tell us that "the wine" signifies the true faith, and that "the beloved lad" stands as a symbol for God, and that "the intoxication" means pious ecstasy brought forth by a deep contemplation of the divine works and words, etc. This has, indeed, been carried so far, that pilgrims from all parts of Persia now resort to the tomb of Hafiz, and almost regard that frivolous poet as a saint. (Who is not reminded, by these commentaries upon Hafiz, of a number of commentaries, Jewish and Christian, upon the Song of Solomon, Psalm xlv., and other parts of the Bible?)

The theologians among the Muhammedans assert that their Bible-expositions reveal the real and true meaning of the Scriptures. If, now, some of them would face us to-day, and would notice how we shake our heads at their strange interpretations, they would probably say: You are too superficial in your explanation of the sacred books; the "inner light" has evidently not dawned upon you; the "deeper sense" of the Scriptures has remained hidden to you. The Christian Mystics speak also of a "deeper sense;" the Jewish Kabbalists speak likewise of Mysteries, "Sôdhôth," etc. . . .

But do Muhammedans alone interpret the Bible under the influence of their religious prejudices? Jews and Christians also have sinned, and do continue to sin, in the same direction. Not that they sin consciously; not that they pervert the sense of the Bible wilfully; they err unconsciously. They *believe* that their expositions are the true ones, the only true ones. And they have not, and, in centuries gone by, they could not have, sufficient philological and other necessary knowledge to prevent them from making errors. We, rising above sectarian narrowness, must now be ready to admit that, in many instances, our own teachers, in olden times, erred, and that, in many instances, their interpretations cannot stand the light of criticism. Here also we may give illustrations. Rashi, an excellent Jewish expounder of the Bible, who wrote eight hundred years ago (he died 1105), explains the first verse of Genesis thus: "B'rê'shîth, *in the beginning*;

'b'rēshīth' is equivalent to 'bīsh'bhīl rē'shīth,' *for the sake of rē'shīth*. For the sake of rē'shīth God created the world. Rē'shīth is, then, first, a designation of the Torah; for, in Prov. VIII., 22, the Torah is called 'rē'shīth dārkô,' *the beginning of God's ways*. Rē'shīth, secondly, means God's chosen people Israel; for, in Jer. II., 3, Israel is referred to in the words 'rē'shīth t'bhû'āthô,' *the beginning of God's productions*." Rashi desires, by his interpretation, to set forth the idea that God created the world, in order that the Torah should become manifest therein, and be a power therein, and for the further purpose that Israel should, so to speak, have a standing place, a sphere for his being and his fulfilling his mission in the world. Rashi here followed older Jewish authorities who preceded him with this explanation. We now find little to admire in this kind of interpretation; we think that b'rē'shīth means simply "in the beginning," and that no other sense, no "deeper sense," no "hidden sense" is contained in it. So much is certain to us, that the author—whether it was Moses, or some one living hundreds of years after Moses—did not think of the Torah, or of Israel, when he wrote down the word "b'rē'shīth." And our object, in our endeavor to understand the Bible words correctly, must now be to find an answer to the question, What did the author at first mean by his words? Of former interpretations, be they now by Rashi, or by St. Jerome, or by Luther, or by others, we take respectful and thankful notice, but we do so in the same spirit and manner as historians take notice of old documents, of old scientific views and systems. We carefully examine them; we accept what appears to us good and true; we reject what, according to our understanding, is erroneous. But far is it from us to take everything in them as being absolutely true. . . .

We have given a few examples of old Jewish explications which, in the light of modern scholarship, we unhesitatingly declare to be incorrect and untenable and to be colored by Jewish bias. But Catholics, and Protestants, also, otherwise quite erudite and quite independent in their studies and researches, show, often enough, in their Bible expositions the mighty influence upon them of opinions and doctrines that were inculcated into their minds when they were young. There have been, and probably there are, Catholic scholars who find in the Old Testament quite a number of allusions to the virgin Mary, the queen of heavens, as they call her, and to the almost divine attributes which are ascribed to her by the Roman Church. In the so-called Protevangelium (Gen. III., 15) where it is said that the seed of the woman will bruise the head of the serpent, Catholic theologians found the sense that *she*, the holy virgin, will bruise the serpent's head—*ipsa* conteret caput tuum, so the present editions of the Vulgata read, not *ipse* etc., the feminine gender being used instead of the masculine, despite the Hebrew text having the undisputed masculine pronoun and verb (hû y'shûph'khā) and not the corresponding feminine forms. Thus a text undeniably perverted is preferred to the true original reading, in order to make a Roman Catholic doctrine more plausible and to give to it a biblical basis.

Is it different with Protestant Bible exponents? Are the exegetical works of many of them not tinged by religious prejudices and dogmatical presuppositions? Some of them discover Christ almost in any page of the Old Testament, some of them find the doctrine of the Trinity indicated in the very first word of the Bible,—for are not the letters Beth, Resh, Aleph of the word B'rēshīth the initial letters of Bēn, Rûāh, 'Abh, (*son, spirit, father*)?—According to some of these exegetes it was the Cross that sweetened the waters of Marah, for is not

the numerical value of the Hebrew word for "tree" (Exod. xv., 25) or "wood" (ץע = 70+90) the same as that of the word (in later Hebrew) for "cross" (צלם = 90+30+40)? And may not therefore the words "wood" and "cross" be interchanged?—With some of these exegetes, aye, with large numbers of them, Shiloh, Immanuel, etc., are but typical names of Jesus of Nazareth; for has not "the Church" so taught it for many hundred years?—And this is called Bible Science!

But place yourselves, for a moment, in the position of one who had never heard from a Christian pulpit, or from the lips of a teacher, or who had never read in a book of Christian devotions, that "Immanuel" is Christ; and then read that chapter in Isaiah, where Immanuel is spoken of. In such a condition of your mind the idea will never occur to you that in that plain, clear oration of Isaiah any reference is made to a divine savior who should come more than seven hundred years later. Before the gates of Jerusalem, in the presence of king Ahaz, and of a multitude of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the prophet is standing. The prophet says: Do not despair! Be hopeful! Be of good cheer! The Syrian armies and the armies of Ephraim, who are coming from the North, and who threaten you, and who, you fear, will conquer your land, lay waste your country, and destroy your sanctuary, will not succeed. In a few years the danger will all have passed away, and you will not be molested any more by this enemy. And this sign I will give you. Behold yonder young woman ('ālmāh), she has conceived, and she will bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel; and before that child will be able to distinguish between what is good and evil, the enemy will have gone, the danger will have passed away, and a time of glory and of peace and of happiness will come for the kingdom of Judah, etc., etc.

Is this not a plain prophetic oration which hardly admits any misconstruction? And yet not only pious women and devout peasants, but learned expounders of the Bible cling tenaciously to the idea that Isaiah meant originally Jesus of Nazareth! And in order to make this idea more acceptable, they force upon the word 'ālmāh—which means *any* young woman—the meaning, immaculate virgin!

And in such a forced manner other so-called "messianic" passages are explained. I am well aware that many of these "messianic passages" were already understood and explained as messianic and as having reference to Christ by the authors of the New Testament. It would probably be improper for me to say before you, gentlemen, composing my present audience, that the New Testament expositions of Old Testament passages were not always exact and correct. To many of you the New Testament is the very highest authority in everything, and you might say, Thus far a Bible student may go, not farther. Where Jesus of Nazareth has expounded the words of the Old Testament, or where Paul of Tarsus has set forth their meaning, the true and only true exposition is given. If a modern expounder undertakes to give another explanation, not in harmony with the New Testament, he is presumptuous, he has left Christian grounds.

Far is it from me to combat in your face such positions. So much only I may be allowed to state in this connection, that explanations of Old Testament passages similar to those of St. Paul and the other New Testament writers we find also in the Talmud and Midrash and in the mediæval literature of the Jews. "Shiloh" and Tsemah (*Branch*) were also understood by some Jewish teachers of former ages as having reference to a Messiah. There is, however, a great difference between the Midrash of the Jews and the Midrash of St. Paul, or rather between the position of the Jewish student towards the Jewish Midrash and the

position of the Christian student towards the Christian Midrash. The former sees in the Jewish Midrash historical documents showing how the Scriptures were understood by the Jews at certain times of the past; and to him, to the Jewish student, a transitory stage of Jewish Bible exegesis is thereby made clear. The Christian student, however, finds in the Christian Midrash, that is, in the New Testament, expositions of the Hebrew Scriptures, which he does not consider as merely transitory, as merely characteristic of their times, but which have become for him petrified, authoritative, unalterable.

I have arrived at the limits of the time allotted to me, and therefore I must close. In drawing now a logical conclusion of all that I have said, it seems to me this :

The main question which a scholarly Bible student should ask himself, ought to be, What was the original meaning which the Biblical author desired to express by his words? And in attempting to find a correct answer to this question; that one laying claim to the title of a Bible scholar should free his mind from all misleading preconceptions, from all sectarian bias;—truth, nothing but the truth, should be his aim.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES.

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II.

The next book on my list is entitled, *A Succinct Account of the Rites and Ceremonies of the Jews, as observed by them in their different dispersions throughout the world at this Present Time*, etc., etc. By David Levi, London.

No date is given in the book; but, judging from internal evidence, it was not far from A. D. 1784. The book is a duodecimo of some three hundred and eighteen pages, printed in antiquated style, with the old-fashioned long “s.” The first hundred and thirty pages of the book are devoted to a discussion of the Sabbath, Jewish Calendar, Passover, Day of Sheaf-offering, Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles, and Feast of Purim.

I observe that he says of the Jews during the Paschal Feast, “They likewise may not drink any liquor that is produced from any grain, or matter that is leavened. . . . Their drink during the time of the feast is either fair water or raisin wine prepared by themselves.”

The next portion of the book, to page 213, is devoted to consideration of Marriage, Circumcision, Redemption of First-born, Visitation of Sick and Burial of Dead, Phylacteries, and customary Prayers. Under the head of Marriage, he says that an uncle may marry his niece, while an aunt is not permitted to marry her nephew; the reason being that, in the former case, the law of nature is not reversed, since the same person remained at the head who was so before; while, in the latter case, the nephew marrying his aunt becomes, as it were, her head, thereby reversing the order of nature.

With reference to betrothal, Rabbi Levi says that it is customary among the Jews for the bride and bridegroom to be betrothed for some time previous to the marriage, in order that, during the interval, they may test each other's temper